

Petting Intolerance and Status Aggression in Cats

Rhea V. Morgan, DVM, DACVIM (Small Animal), DACVO

BASIC INFORMATION

Description

Petting intolerance is manifested by growling, biting, and scratching at the time of petting. These behaviors may occur when a person initiates petting, when a certain type of petting is performed, or when petting ceases.

Because cats often include humans in their social hierarchy, some assertive cats may also attempt to control people by being “pushy” or “bossy” when held or petted. These latter behaviors may indicate status aggression, especially if they are directed only toward people who do not hold a position of control or leadership over the cat.

Causes

The cause of petting intolerance is not well understood. Genetics may play a role, because some cats are more likely to exhibit intolerance to petting than others. In some instances, the cat may object to petting performed on one or more parts of the body, such as the back or stomach. When cats groom each other, they usually concentrate on the head and neck, so stroking other parts of the body may be foreign to them and may trigger a defensive reaction.

Owner interactions can vary widely with cats that exhibit petting intolerance. In some instances, the owner may have minimal physical contact with the cat, whereas in other situations the owner may attempt to hold and pet the cat for long periods. In some cases, the cat accepts petting for a period of time, but when some threshold is met the cat no longer wants to be petted.

Clinical Signs

With petting intolerance, the cat becomes aggressive only when it is handled and petted. The petting is commonly initiated by the person. The cat may provide subtle clues of its intention to bite or scratch before it acts aggressively. Such clues may include twitching of the tail or ears, rippling of the skin, licking, dilation of the pupils, and low-volume growling.

With status aggression, the cat may actually seek out the owner, block the owner’s path, and manifest behaviors that indicate a desire for attention, such as head butting and rubbing. Assertive behaviors may occur, including unwillingness to be moved from a resting place, blocking access to doorways, and mock predatory actions as people pass by.

Diagnostic Tests

The behavioral history commonly indicates that some form of petting intolerance is present, but careful examination of the situation

and behaviors may be needed to determine whether status aggression is a component of the condition.

TREATMENT AND FOLLOW-UP

Treatment Options

If certain actions trigger petting intolerance, they should be avoided. For example, if the cat has a certain threshold for duration of petting, then limit the time of petting. If petting a certain area of the body induces aggression, then avoid that area. If the cat becomes aggressive only when the human initiates petting, do not lift, hold, or pet the cat unless it seeks the attention.

Try to separate all petting from physical restraint, so that the two situations are not connected in the cat’s mind. Desensitization and counter-conditioning techniques may be tried to improve the cat’s acceptance of petting. These techniques can be outlined by your veterinarian.

With status aggression, it is important for the people involved to take a stronger leadership role with the cat. Punishment is inappropriate, but positive reinforcement techniques may be used. With positive reinforcement, rewards are given when the cat behaves in a compliant, appropriate fashion. Your veterinarian can also provide you with techniques for either ignoring or interrupting assertive behaviors. For cats that become highly aroused, medical therapy with fluoxetine, sertraline, clomipramine, amitriptyline, or other similar agents may be tried.

Follow-up Care

It is important to have clear goals about improving petting intolerance. Discuss these goals with your veterinarian, and make sure you understand which corrective actions are appropriate for you to take. Follow-up visits are helpful in providing feedback and making modifications in how you approach the situation. Inadvertent or inappropriate responses on the part of people can make the cat’s aggression escalate.

Prognosis

If the cat’s needs and tolerance levels can be clearly defined, petting intolerance can often be resolved by modifying how humans interact with the cat. Resolving status aggression requires time, patience, and persistence, but if the cat can be taught to be subordinate to people in the household, then the prognosis is good. In some instances, the owner(s) and the cat may be a poor match, so adoption of another cat with a preference for petting or a less assertive personality may be considered.